



Oral History of FC Kohli

Interviewed by:
Uday Kapoor

Audio Recorded January 15, 2020
Mumbai, India

CHM Reference number: X9237.2020

© 2020 Computer History Museum

Kapoor: So on behalf of the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, California, it is my privilege to welcome Mr. Faqir Chand Kohli, widely considered to be the Father of the Indian Software Industry. And I would add, Founding Father of the technology business for the country, for his oral history. My name is Uday Kapoor, and I am a volunteer in the Oral Histories Program at the Museum. Mr. Kohli was born in Peshawar, British India in 1924. He received a BSE in Electrical Engineering from Queens University, Canada in 1948, and an MS in Electrical Engineering--

Kohli: No, I went to Canada in '46 and because that was before the partition. '48 is partition.

Kapoor: Right.

Kohli: But '48 is wrong.

Kapoor: But your degree was in '48, right?

Kohli: What?

Kapoor: Your degree. You received your degree in 1948?

Kohli: Yeah, I went to Queens first, and you don't have to talk about degree, you have to talk about that I went there, I got the BSE Honors in Electrical Engineering. Then I worked for a year with the General Electric, and then went to MIT to do Master's.

Kapoor: Okay, right, right.

Kohli: And--

Kapoor: Good, so you were the Founder and first CEO of Tata Consultancy Services.

Kohli: Yeah.

Kapoor: India's largest software consultancy company. After your retirement, served on numerous boards and has been awarded by numerous prestigious organizations and professional societies. In 2002, Mr. Kohli was awarded the Padma Bhushan, one of India's highest civilian awards. So with that, we can start our conversation. As you were saying, you were born in Peshawar, and you encountered the--

Kohli: See, there are two things to be talked about. Indians are capable of doing a lot of things. And only thing is they have to receive some training. Some encouragement, and they can produce results.

Kapoor: Yes.

Kohli: And Indians are not only bright, but doers. And, but at the same time, we have the largest set of population which is illiterate.

Kapoor: Yes.

Kohli: So I set up-- I mean, after retirement, how to train a person 30 hours in his own language to be able to read a newspaper at the age of 25. It worked! I mean, read the newspaper at a very slow speed, but it worked. And then the government took over. And that is where it is still lying.

Kapoor: I see. So when you first worked in the United States, you were interested in electrical engineering, especially electrical generation and transmission.

Kohli: No, I was not at all-- first, yes. I was with the power company, New England Power Company. And where I learned about the load dispatch, because I thought India needed how to schedule generation and work it. And but I was mainly in United States to educate myself further.

Kapoor: Of course.

Kohli: I had done my BSE Honors from Government College Lahore in Physics.

Kapoor: Yes.

Kohli: And in '46, I got a scholarship to go to Queens in Canada. Queens is the best university in Canada. So I spent about a little more than year-and-a-half in completing the BSE Honors in Electrical Engineering. And thereafter, I got an offer from General Electric. And I worked with them for about 11 or 12 months, and I had also applied for Master's at MIT. I was accepted there. I got a scholarship also from them. And that is the story.

Kapoor: So you came back to India and worked for Tata Electric.

Kohli: Yeah, '51 I came back. At that time, I had two choices. One, to make a career with Tata Electric. They wanted to set up the first load dispatch in India. Load dispatches would decide what a particular generating station is going to generate, and so I meant you keeping view of the line losses or the error efficiencies and all that. And the-- it worked! And then Tata's had thought of setting up the Tata Consultancy Service. And I had installed some computer services for them, and in '69, I had started first computer controlling the power grid. And then Mr. J. R. D. Tata asked me to setup Tata Consultancy.

Kapoor: Right, yeah. So how did you see the importance of computing to industry and business at that time?

Kohli: No, the thing is that it's not. The question is you were the starter. I mean, you couldn't look around that if there's a background or all that. All that I could do is work with the IITs to see the education is enough for the people to do the most difficult things. In power engineering, or any other engineering.

Kapoor: Right. Correct. So how did the relationship with Burroughs begin?

Kohli: Huh?

Kapoor: The relationships with Burroughs Computer?

Kohli: Burroughs, I built up relationship when I was there in United States.

Kapoor: Right. So how important was it to the future of TCS? The relationship with Burroughs? Was it important for TCS?

Kohli: Yeah, it is the thing is how would we-- I would set up TCS if I had not done all that work?

Kapoor: Right, correct. How did TCS fit with Mr. Ratan Tata's strategy in the 1980s?

Kohli: You see, the thing is at that time, Mr. J.R.D.T. was the head when I joined Tatas

Kapoor: Right.

Kohli: And then he has trained other people like Ratan Tata, other things, and all that. But I had only dealings with Ratan after he became the Director on the Tata board.

Kapoor: Yes, yes. So what was your philosophy on management? You headed TCS.

Kohli: Well, the philosophy, it's not if somebody says you have a philosophy, I don't believe them at all. Okay? The thing is the every management needs a lot more input than just the management fundamentals. You keep the fundamentals in view. But you have to work out a strategy for each organization which is different, quite different from others.

Kapoor: Yes, correct. What was your strategy for growing the business at TCS?

Kohli: Huh?

Kapoor: To grow the business at TCS, were there any special strategies?

Kohli: No, there were not special strategies. Strategy was that I had built up very strong interaction with the engineering colleges, especially the IITs, starting from Kanpur IIT. So people knew about us. It's not that we started and conversing. There was no question of my going for business. The people came to us, "Could you do this for us?"

Kapoor: Right, right. So I understand that there was business done with IBM in 1990/91 to look at a way to have partners with IBM.

Kohli: Yeah, that is-- the thing is that there are a lot of partnerships. First partnership came-- partnership not legal, though-- with Burroughs, which was number two computer company at that time. IBM came much later.

Kapoor: Yes, in the 1990/'91 timeframe.

Kohli: Yeah, so whatever came our way, we helped them. Because the idea was this country is big enough. It has more educated people than any other country. It can absorb lot of technology.

Kapoor: Yes, yes. But you taught people how to configure the right business, how to do that as a business.

Kohli: No Uday, the thing is business portion was not mine. Business portion was each person had to decide what; but he knew where to look for what technology he wanted. What will work in this country, what will also work on international basis.

Kapoor: Yes, yes.

Kohli: Because you take Tata Consultancy Services. First few years it was built only on exports. People didn't understand.

Kapoor: Yes, yes. So in terms of working with other companies in the United States, for example. I understand that ELXSI was funded by Tata's as a first computer company in California.

Kohli: That is ELXSI, and that is it was not only funded. It was-- they were supplied with the technical support and all that. But that was a commercial decision! I had nothing to do with it!

Kapoor: Okay, okay. So you retired from TCS in 1996?

Kohli: 1999! Not '96!

Kapoor: '99.

Kohli: '96 is wrong!

Kapoor: Okay. I stand corrected.

Kohli: I worked till I was 75 with Tata Consultancy Services.

Kapoor: Yes.

Kohli: And then I was left alone to do anything I wanted to do! They left me a office. They left me the help staff and all that. And I mean, I have helped almost all the education institutions. I have also, as I

said, I tried that there would be no illiterate in this country, and I tried and designed a system. But then the government had to initiate it in that respect, which I left to the government. I was-- don't forget that I was-- when I-- '99 when I left TCS, I was already 75.

Kapoor: Yes, yes, of course. So what are you most proud of in your work with TCS?

Kohli: I have no-- what?

Kapoor: In the TCS, what are you most proud of in creating TCS?

Kohli: I built TCS! So what is the question of whether work in TCS?

Kapoor: Yes. But it had grew to be the largest consultancy company.

Kohli: Right, it is the only consulting company that started in India. It pioneered other organizations also to get into it.

Kapoor: Right, right. So what is most meaningful for you in the rise of the Indian software industry? What do you consider? Because the world knows India's software industry.

Kohli: The software industry is a brain industry. You are not-- you apply computers to what you design software that will work on that computer and use that computer most efficiently. And also computerized as much of Indian industry as possible. provide them computer services and all. I built up one part of organize-- and then other organizations came. But they all have learned something from me. They all, if you talk to them, they have a lot of respect for me.

Kapoor: Yes, of course. So where do you see the future of computing in India?

Kohli: You see-- can I ask you a back question?

Kapoor: Sure.

Kohli: What do you consider the computers in United States?

Kapoor: What do we consider computers? It has expanded from--

Kohli: The thing it is to start with fundamentally it is a calculating device.

Kapoor: Yes.

Kohli: You have to work, learn how to use it. Just like you learned how to use a calculator. So it is up to you, how, what you want to use, what you don't want to use and all that. You know, and that I can't tell you about it, because that is known college also teaches.

Kapoor: Right, right. So actually-- you know I worked for Sun Microsystems, and there we called it network is the computer. So distributed network is way of the comp--

Kohli: Yeah, the computer work is always distributed. There's no question about it.

Kapoor: Right.

Kohli: That is why India-- I encourage so many other organizations to commit.

Kapoor: Right, right, correct.

Kohli: You can ask any of them. They have a high regard for me.

Kapoor: Of course, of course. You set it up, you are the Father. So--

Kohli: No, Father is a misnomer. I'm not a-- I'm father of my three children. That's all.

Kapoor: <laughs> But you're considered the icon.

Kohli: No, no, that is a misnomer. And I don't use it.

Kapoor: You are very humble, thank you.

Kohli: No, it's not humble. The question is I did set up the computer industry in this country, and that is that. People know it. I can't say that I'm the father this/that. The next question that you will ask, "Where are the children?"

Kapoor: So what advice do you have for the future generation? Any advice

Kohli: I advise-- my advice is that future lies in technology. And technology is changing very rapidly. It's-- computers is one of the tools it uses. The other part is the thinking of this. And but this country has a lot more to do. First thing is I had to see all those people who do not know English still can work with the computers. See? And also I have to provide the education in the colleges for those who will go abroad for further education.

Kapoor: That's correct. And the computing has become so widespread. For example, the--

Kohli: Yeah, yeah, the computer is-- your iPhone is a computer.

Kapoor: Yes, exactly.

Kohli: So what is the question of computer is widespread or not? The question is the thing is computer devises a technology. And that is all goes that into this. But the computers have been helping you to run the country! And especially the other countries than India.

Kapoor: Yes, yes. I think a lot of the software skills that are coming from India are revolutionizing the whole computing world. So any concluding comments you would like to make?

Kohli: No, no, I have no comments on it that I-- all I want to tell you, Indians are very bright. But it is the selection system that we have in this country and the teaching system and all that, they have to contribute.

Kapoor: So.

Kohli: This country can be-- I don't think of it, but it can be on the-- along with the top countries in the world.

Kapoor: Yes, yes, of course. Thank you so much for your time! It was a privilege, and a lot of people will be very happy to hear your--

Kohli: Thank you. Okay!

Kapoor: Thank you so much!

END OF THE INTERVIEW